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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000745

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GREECE PRESSURING ALBANIA ON BORDER, CEMETERY
ISSUES

Classified By: CDA Stephen A. Cristina, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Greek government is pressuring the GOA to accept its demands in bilateral negotiations to demarcate the two countries' maritime border. Athens is also threatening to refuse to ratify Albania's Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU over a contentious issue involving Greek military cemeteries in Albania, in what the GOA views as a repeat of Greek blackmail used against Macedonia's NATO membership ambitions. Talks on the cemetery Issue continue after the latest round of negotiations on September 30 ended inconclusively. End Summary.

ALBANIA: GREECE MANIPULATING BORDER DEMARCATION METHODS

¶2. (C) According to Ledia Hysi, Director of Legal Affairs and Treaties at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Albanian and Greek governments have been negotiating for several months to demarcate their maritime border. The negotiations have encountered multiple problems due to what she described as the Greeks' "double standard" by using different demarcation methods for different portions of the coastline, while Albania uses one standard baseline demarcation system employed under existing international conventions. In other words, the Albanians charge the Greeks with cherry-picking the most favorable borders by using different demarcation methods for separate points of the border. During one of the recent negotiating sessions in Tirana, the Greek official heading the delegation gave his Albanian counterpart an ultimatum. The Greek Government would be willing to compromise on the maritime border near Corfu (reportedly due to existing American military interests to build a U.S. military installation in Jale, Southern Albania). However, the Greek official warned the Albanian delegation to comply with their other requests and to keep "distant powers," namely the U.S, out of the negotiations. An identical phrase was also used in a meeting in Tirana by the Greek Ambassador during a meeting with Foreign Minister Basha.

BEWARE OF GREEKS BEARING UNREASONABLE DEMANDS?

¶3. (C) Another contentious issue between Athens and Tirana is Greek demands to build up to four military cemeteries in southern and eastern Albania to commemorate Greek soldiers who died in Albania fighting Italian forces in 1920. The GOA opposes the Greek proposal because it objects to Athens' plan for foreign military cemeteries on Albanian soil that would be based on a separate religious and ethnic identity, and also for giving

Athens a toehold to exercise historical Greek territorial claims to southern Albania. In spite of repeated demands by the GOA to establish an independent commission of experts to determine the issue, Athens has always maintained that the cemeteries issue is a "take it or leave it" proposition.

¶4. (C) On September 30, Greek and Albanian negotiators met in Tirana but failed again to hash out an agreement on the cemetery issue. According to the Albanian Director General for Regional Affairs and chief negotiator, Islam Lauka, the Albanians rejected a Greek demand for four cemeteries in southern Albania, offering instead one cemetery in Tirana. (NOTE: The remains of British, German and most other foreign troops killed in Albania during WWI, WWII and the Balkan Wars were gathered and interred in Tirana. The remains of Italian troops were gathered and returned to Italy. No foreign troops have been buried in Albania "on the battlefield," as the Greek government has requested. END NOTE.)

¶5. (C) According to Lauka, after rejecting the initial Greek offer, the Albanian side agreed to allow one Greek cemetery in southern Albania - an offer Lauka characterized as a major concession, given the fact that all other cemeteries for foreign troops are in Tirana. The

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Greeks made a counter-offer for 2 cemeteries in the south, with an option for a third cemetery later. The GOA turned down the Greek proposal, thus ending the talks inconclusively.

¶6. (C) Lauka noted that as it became clear to the Greek side that the talks were not going as planned, one of the Greek negotiators told Lauka that because of domestic political considerations it would be unacceptable for the Greeks "to go home empty handed." Lauka told the Greek team that the Albanians had their own domestic political considerations to worry about as well, referring to the ethnic-Albanian Cham population that was expelled from Greece following WWII and has ongoing property restitution claims with the government of Greece (to be reported septel).

GREECE THREATENS TO BLOCK ALBANIA SAA

¶7. (C) During a previous round of negotiations over the cemeteries, after passing the message to keep Washington out of the negotiations, the Greeks gave the Albanians a second, stronger ultimatum. While Albania's Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union has been ratified so far by 22 EU countries, Greece is among the last three states that so far have not. The Greek Ambassador told Basha that if the GOA does not agree to Athens' terms regarding the military cemeteries, then the Greek parliament will never ratify the SAA. He also told Basha that on the same day that Albania signs off on the cemeteries issue, the Greek Parliament will ratify Albania's SAA. On the issue of the countries' maritime border - and in spite of the fact that the Greek negotiating stance is contrary to international conventions - Athens has said that the border will either be agreed upon on its terms or

not at all. Hysi said the Greek position was a serious threat to the long-term development of the southern coastal area, as it will create obstacles for tourism, transport, fishing, seabed oil and gas exploitation, and that it could even lead to territorial incidents with Greece. With memories still fresh over Athens' veto of Macedonia's NATO invitation, the GOA believes the Greek positions on the maritime border and the cemeteries issues to be serious threats to Albanian interests and sovereignty.

COMMENT

18. (C) The GOA at this point does not seem overly worried about Greece's threat to block SAA ratification, apparently believing that as long as Albania continues to make a good-faith effort to continue talks the Greeks won't want to isolate themselves within the EU over an issue other EU countries will likely see as minor. But in the wake of Greek success in blocking Macedonia's NATO aspirations, the Albanians aren't convinced either that the Greeks are merely bluffing. At this point the GOA has not asked for U.S. assistance or intervention with Greece, preferring to work this out with the Greeks themselves.

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